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ABSTRACT

A study was designed to investigate ways in which schools are responding to new opportunities to participate more fully in the delivery of high quality, family-responsive early childhood programs. Phase One of the study aims to develop a comprehensive overview of the status of child care and early childhood education for kindergarten and younger children in each state and in the District of Columbia. Phase Two surveyed 3,000 school districts previously identified as providers of preschool programs. Survey questions probed the nature and extent of their involvement. Currently underway, Phase Three studies in close detail 12 programs affiliated with public schools which were nominated as high quality programs providing comprehensive services and opportunities for parent participation, and having appropriate staff/child ratios, appropriately trained teachers, and a planned curriculum derived from principles of child development. Preliminary findings of the national and district surveys are reported. (RH)

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Early Childhood Education and the Public Schools

Prepared for the Special Evening Presentation at NAEYC's 1986 Annual Conference in Washington, DC. November 15, 1986

Presenters: Anne Mitchell and Michelle Seligson, Co-Directors, The Public School Early Childhood Study, a collaborative research project of Bank Street College of Education, New York, and the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA.

The Public School Early Childhood Study is a thirty-month, three-phase research effort investigating the involvement of public schools in the delivery of early childhood programs. The study examines both practical operations and policy implications of public school involvement in early childhood programs at the state, district, and school level. The Study's objectives include a focus on ways in which public school programs respond to the needs of the families who use them and the extent to which such programs reflect the body of applied research knowledge about early childhood programs.

Context

Currently in the United States there is a climate favorable to an expanded role for schools in the provision of early childhood programs. Among the factors that many consider part of this context are: current interest in educational reforms, particularly in increasing school readiness among children with language or other developmental delays; the rapid changes in the labor force participation of women, particularly women who are mothers of young children; and evidence published from the longitudinal research findings of studies on the impact of early childhood programs such as the Perry Preschool Project.

In recent months, many national education and policy advocacy groups have announced support for increased public school involvement in preschool education. There has been impressive national press coverage of the release of various study findings showing gains to children from participation in early childhood programs. At least twenty states and at least one big city have initiated special legislation or demonstration funding programs, usually to be administered by State Departments of Education, although not universally. The labor force participation rates of mothers and the needs of working families for child care has provided much of the stated rationale for these efforts, yet many of these initiatives do not emphasize child care.

The Study Design

The Study was designed to investigate ways in which schools are responding to the new opportunity to participate more fully in the delivery of high quality, family-responsive early childhood programs.

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The goal of Phase One, conducted at the Wellesley Center for Research on Women, is to develop a comprehensive overview of the status of child care and early childhood education, for children kindergarten age and younger, in the fifty states and the District of Columbia. Fiscal, programmatic, regulatory and policy-related information is being gathered from State Departments of Education, Human Services, Day Care Licensing, and Head Start through telephone interviews, questionnaires, and other written materials. In light of the increasing national interest and investment in preschool programs there is an urgent need to develop a uniform, state level data base which will permit cross-state comparisons; identify emerging trends in the provision of early childhood services; and measure the effects of preschool initiatives on the availability, accessibility, and quality of programs for children kindergarten age and younger in the United States. We also anticipate that these study interviews with state child care and public school early childhood experts will provide a bridge between these fields.

In Phase Two of the Study, conducted at Bank Street College, 3,000 school districts across the United States were contacted. These districts had previously identified themselves as providing preschool programs. Approximately 50% of this initial group responded and were subsequently surveyed. Survey questions were designed to explore the nature and extent of their involvement. (For the purposes of the survey, early childhood program was defined as any program for children younger than kindergarten age. Public school affiliated is defined as funded and/or administered by a public school district, or directly related by other means such as in-kind services, use of space by community agencies, etc.) Survey instruments were field tested in several sites, as were Phase One interview protocols.

Phase Three is currently underway. We are studying in close detail a selection of twelve programs affiliated with the public schools, and nominated for consideration by early childhood and elementary professionals, school district personnel, parents, and interested others. These programs and the communities in which they exist form the basis of case studies which describe operational, programmatic, and administrative information, population served, problems or barriers encountered, and solutions to those problems which may have been devised. Criteria for the selection of sites were developed after an extensive review of literature on aspects of quality in early childhood programs, on the basis of discussion among Study staff and advisors, and to reflect regionality, urbanicity, size, and other factors. Selection criteria for the Study's field sites, as described in Study's nomination papers:

1. Comprehensive Services: A nominated program offers cognitive/academic activities within the context of a full child development curriculum addressing social, emotional, physical and cognitive growth. A nominated program provides needed health, social, speech, or other services directly or refers children to community services.

2. High Quality Staffing: A nominated program for four year olds limits class size to 20 or fewer children and maintains a staff/child ratio of no more than 1:10, with both ratio and class size adjusted for younger children.

3. Teacher Qualifications: A nominated program employs teachers who have specific training in early childhood education and child development and who have experience working with young children.

4. Curriculum: A nominated program has a planned curriculum derived from principles of child development and supports the curriculum by supervising teaching staff and offering purposeful in-service training.

5. Parent Participation: A nominated program views parents as partners and meaningfully involves them in the program. For example, the program welcomes parent visits and supports frequent communication between parents and program staff beyond parent-teacher conferences. The program might have an advisory board with a high percentage of parent members.

The States' Survey: Preliminary Findings:

One of the early findings is the extent to which policy making is becoming centralized at the state level. While program specialists completed the study's data requests, the interviews may reflect a trend toward centralization of the policy making function across what has been traditionally considered separate units. Twenty-two states combine two or more program areas. In eight states day care licensing and Title XX/SSBG share the same policy staff. Seven states combine state employment and training/WIN and AFDC income disregard. In a few states most or all program areas are combined. Several states have created centralized offices for the coordination of child care programs and policy which are variously housed in departments of human services or in Governor's offices.

Among states projecting funding increases during the 1986-87 period, estimates for child care for 1987 indicate an overall slowing of funding. Among the 21 states which indicate increases in both years or level funding in one of the two years, twice as many report less increase in the 1986-87 period. Of those states that are allocating increased funding for child care and new or increased funding for state preschool programs, the economic health of the state seems to be the primary determinant of support for child care. States with less robust economic conditions are more likely to enact preschool legislation.

While many states may gather the required information on numbers of children served and funding levels by specific age groups across a variety of programs, our initial analysis suggests that few states have the necessary capacity in computer programming, staff or time to provide this information for research and planning purposes, either to outside groups or for internal state use.

In the area of coordination between child care and education policy and regulatory agencies and personnel, approximately half of the state licensing officials did not know the differences between public school regulations and day care licensing. Among states with some form of preschool legislation, licensing personnel appear to be somewhat more likely to be aware of the differences than those from states without legislation.

Overall sixteen states indicate no interaction between day care licensing and the Department of Education, but sixteen states report indirect or informal contact through serving on committees concerned with non-day care public school regulatory efforts such as planning services to handicapped children; six states report interaction only around school-age child care issues; and fourteen report direct contact between the two agencies around shared regulatory issues and concerns.

States with some form of preschool legislation report higher levels of direct contact and involvement (46%) than other states (11%).

The District Survey: Preliminary Findings:

The following are some selected highlights from the district survey to which 44% of the districts responded overall (the "program questionnaire" sent to superintendents received a higher response rate). None of the data have yet been analyzed by differentiated program type. Most of the districts report serving targeted populations--children with low test scores, special needs, or low family income. Thus 50% are funded by local, state, or federal government funds, and 16% use parent tuition. Half of the programs are less than ten years old; 35% are less than five years old. Sixty percent of the programs operate for three hours a day or less; and 80% operate during the school year only and are closed on vacations and holidays. The 12% of the programs that offer child care do so for approximately nine hours a day except for child care programs for teenage mothers, which operate an average of six hours per day. Programs that offer child care are likely to be in middle-size, suburban districts (between 2,500 and 10,000 students), except for the child care programs for teenage mothers which are located predominately in large urban districts.

In response to questions related to teaching staff, 50% of programs require early childhood certification; 73% require a B.A. degree, and 66% require no classroom experience. Ninety percent of teachers are district employees, 72% are on the same pay scale as other teaching personnel, and 18% are on a different, and lower pay scale. Among those teachers with a B.A. and no experience, 80% are earning between $10,000 and $20,000 per year. In employing paraprofessionals, two thirds of the programs require a high school diploma or GED; in 20% the paraprofessionals must be over age 18; and most are working 35-hour weeks, 35-40 weeks/year, earning $7,000 or less.

Response was extremely low to questions related to the relationship between program and parents. However, a group of questions related to parent involvement did elicit high percentage responses. These included holding parent-teacher conferences (90%), having a newsletter (60%), advisory committee (50%), and parent volunteers (60%). Although the data have not yet been fully analyzed or correlated, we suspect this group of responses come primarily from Chapter I and Head State respondents. To other questions, 50% of the respondents said parent conferences were scheduled after work hours; 25% bus children after school to a location other than the child's home; 35% provided no transportation.

Average class size by age of child: 4 year olds in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs are in classes of approximately 20 children; three year olds are in slightly smaller groups, and two year olds are in classes that average ten children. Staff/child ratios range from 1:10 for four year olds in a variety of program types to ratios of 1:5 for one-year olds in child care programs. Forty seven percent of the programs are exempt from licensing; 3% voluntarily applied for a license; and 27% are subject to licensing.

Finally, the survey asked respondents if they were planning to expand either hours, age range, or numbers of children served. Eighty five percent of the respondents think the age range will stay the same and will not get younger; 85-90% think the number of hours per day/per year will stay the same; and 54% think the number of children served will increase.